DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 927 CE 071 057

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TITLE Equal Opportunities and European Educational/Vocational Policy [and] Equal Opportunities and the European Social Fund.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 14p.; First paper was presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (Bath, England, United Kingdom, September 1995). Second paper was presented at the Final Conference on the European "NOW" Initiative (Nuremberg, Germany, November 24-25, 1994). For related documents, see CE 071 058-060.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Adult Education; Case Studies; Educational Policy; *Equal Education; Equal Opportunities (Jobs); *Females; Foreign Countries; *Job Training; Labor Market; Nontraditional Occupations; Sex Discrimination; Sex Fairness; *Unemployment; *Vocational Education; *Womens Education; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *European Social Fund

ABSTRACT

This document contains a symposium paper and a conference paper. "Equal Opportunities and European Educational and Vocational Policy" explores the symposium theme of concepts of difference as it relates directly to the European discourse of equal opportunities and its influence on European educational and vocational policy. It outlines the economic roots of European equal opportunities policy and identifies the main structures and processes by which it works: the Action Programs, the Equal Opportunities Unit, and the European Social Fund (ESF). It considers the discourse itself and argues that in its gender exclusivity it is effectively ridden with class and race assumptions and divisions. Finally, the paper considers the European discourse in relation to the similarity/difference debate surrounding the equality of women. "Equal Opportunities and the European Social Fund" explores the linkage between the discourse of equal opportunities and the training policies of ESF. Drawing on research findings, the paper focuses on the ways in which the discourse of equal opportunities influences the ESF's Objective 3 vocational policies for unemployed women. It argues that the discourse of equal opportunities focuses so intently on gender--a gender exclusivity that, combined with a lack of class or race analysis, leads to the ESF's persistent and simplistic emphasis on training unemployed women in nontraditional manual skills. (YLB)

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Sept. 1995

Symposium: Concepts of difference within European educational and vocational policy.

Equal opportunities and European educational/vocational policy.

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Introduction.

In this paper I will explore the symposium theme of concepts of difference as it relates directly to the European discourse of equal opportunities and its influence on European educational and vocational policy. I begin by outlining the economic roots of European equal opportunities policy, and identifying the main structures and processes by which it works: the Action Programmes, the Equal Opportunities Unit, and the European Social Fund (ESF). I shall then consider the discourse itself, arguing that in its gender exclusivity it is effectively ridden with class and race assumptions and divisions. Finally I will consider the European discourse in relation to the similarity/difference debate surrounding the equality of women.

The economic roots of European equal opportunities policy.

The equal opportunities legislation of the EU is rooted in the Treaty of Rome (1957), through Article 119's concern with 'equal pay between men and women'. The basis for the inclusion of Article 119 is generally accepted as economic. The aim of Article 119 was:

> "to ensure that *free competition was not distorted* by the employment of women at lower rates than men for the same work." (EC Background Report, 1978, p1; emphasis added).

The immediate impact of Article 119 was that it required Member States to implement it. For example, within the UK it led to the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equal Pay Act (1970, amended 1984). The subsequent impact of Article 119 is the increasing prominence of the discourse of equal opportunities within the public domain. The construction of the discourse of equal opportunities reflects both the EU's economic concerns and the egalitarian democratic aspirations of Western liberal democracy. The focus of this paper is on the discourse of equal opportunities, not the legislation. By discourse I mean the linguistic and textual expression of ideas which together with politics and social practice, constitute our subjective understandings of the world and our existence within it. Discourses are not static but capable of change over time, and as such, reflect, and are of, that time.

Structures and processes by which the discourse operates.

It is possible to identify three main structures or processes by which the EU discourse of equal opportunities operates.

1. Action programmes.

The Action Programmes for the Equal Opportunities of Women represent a major site for the location of the EU discourse. So far there have been three programmes, each lasting between 3 to 5 years: 1982 to 1985; 1986 to 1990; 1991 to 1995. The 4th Action Programme is currently in the process of being adopted by the Commission with the intention that it operate from 1996 to 2000. The Action Programmes are in Commission 'Recommendations'. They carry no legal force as such, but nevertheless provide a clear understanding of the European Commission's intention behind relevant legislation and

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policy action. Their importance lies in the fact that they provide a sort of 'mission statement' of priorities for action and funding Objectives; they are an interpretative filter through which all relevant European legislation and policy are passed.

2. The Equal Opportunities Unit.

The administration of the European Commission is carried out through a bureaucratic structure of Directorate Generals. Of particular interest to this conference is DG V, for this is the directorate general responsible for education, training, employment and social affairs. And, it also includes the Equal Opportunities Unit.

It is the Equal Opportunities Unit that produces and evaluates the Equal Opportunities Action Programmes. As mentioned above, Article 119 was concerned only with equality of gender. This Article is the legal basis for the existence and the brief of the Equal Opportunities Unit. As such, the Equal Opportunities Unit, building on the gender exclusivity of Article 119, continues to recognise 'equal opportunities' only in terms of gender inequality.

For example, in May 1994, the European Commission held a working conference to discuss the Commission Green Paper on Social Policy. In the equal opportunities seminars there was considerable debate surrounding exactly who was to be included within the term of equal opportunities. A very strong lobby from people with disabilities and Commissioner Flynn's arguments for it to be broadened out, met strong resistance from the employees and supporters of the Equal Opportunities Unit.

More recently, Jacques Santer has set up, and will lead a group of Commissioners who will report on *Equal Opportunities for men and women, and women's rights'*. This group of Commissioners will be particularly concerned with the presence of equal opportunities within other policies of the European Union. They will begin by focusing on seven areas, including the labour market; education, training and culture; and individual rights. The remit of this group appears firstly, to reinforce the gender exclusivity of the discourse of equal opportunities, and secondly, through its emphasis on *women's rights* to strengthen the discourse's location within a formal equality framework.

3. European Social Fund (ESF).

The ESF was set up through Article 123 of the Treaty of Rome (1957), with the purpose of supporting the vocational training and retraining of workers. It is one of the three Structural Funds of the European Union. The others are the Agricultural Fund and the Regional Development Fund. My research has focused particularly on the training policies relating to women - especially working-class and low educated women.

There are two avenues of funding for women's training within the ESF: the Main Objectives and the Initiatives. Objective 3 of the main objectives targets the long term unemployed with a subsection for women. The Initiatives programme includes the NOW initiative - New Opportunities for Women. There are two points to be made about these two avenues of funding. The first is a matter of control. The main objectives are subject to more individual Member State government control than the Initiatives which are still directed more centrally by the Commission. The second point relates to the targeted trainees. Objective 3 is targeted on low educated, long term unemployed women whereas the NOW Initiative is targeted on higher educated, women returners. In class terms, objective 3 targets the working-class; NOW, the middle-class.

Underpinning both objective 3 and the NOW initiative is the discourse of equal opportunities. As shown in the distinction between the funding programmes, the European discourse of equal opportunities is *not* class free. Furthermore, it not only lacks class and race analysis, it also fails to recognise other power based differentials such as age, disability or sexuality.

European equal opportunities discourse.

The gender exclusiveness of Article 119 determined the remit of the Equal Opportunities Unit and has permeated the European equal opportunities discourse. The Equal Opportunities Unit has shown itself resistant to pressures made to broaden the concept, and continues to concern itself with equal opportunities of women and men. The 'and men' is a misnomer and should read 'the equal opportunities of women in relation to men'. The discourse is exclusively concerned with gender inequality. It assumes that the inequality experienced by women results from rights and treatment which are differentiated by gender, and which therefore, can be rectified by giving women equal rights and equal opportunities. This argument concludes that in order to address this gendered inequality, it is necessary to provide women with access to that which men have. The European policy based research I have carried out shows that this gender exclusivity of the discourse is evident throughout vocational policy (Brine 1995).

The discourse's gender exclusivity and its lack of class or race analysis results in white and black working-class women being encouraged, through the ESF funded training schemes, into skills that reflect assumptions regarding their class and race male counterparts. Within this discourse, training policy is interpreted as meaning women's access to the class-equivalent *male* occupation - or rather skill areas, for in practice, such training - certainly for working class or low educated women, rarely leads to paid employment in a related occupation (Brine, 1992). Furthermore, the gender exclusivity of the discourse directly influences training policy focusing solely on *occupational* underrepresentation - ignoring hierarchical under-representation. The effect of this is to increase the significance of a woman's age, race, class or disability.

The influence of the gender exclusive equal opportunities discourse on training policy means that working-class girls and women are encouraged into traditional working-class male manual jobs, and middle-class girls and women are encouraged into the traditional middle-class male domains of science, engineering, technology and management. My own research findings (1992) and those of Cockburn 1987 point to a feminization of occupational areas associated with women that show that neither working-class nor middle-class women are likely to disrupt the existing occupational hierarchies of entrenched male power.

Similarity/difference debate.

The similarity/difference debate surrounding the equality of women provides a framework in which to consider this European discourse.

The rational argument for both class and gender equality can be traced back to the Enlightenment, to for example, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791/2), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) and *The subjection of women* (1869). This rational argument is that each individual, irrespective of class or sex, has the same basic natural rights and that, therefore, there is no justification for any legislation that takes those basic rights away.

equality to the similarity approach, and argues that the 'difference' approach is more likely to result in material (economic) equality; and thirdly, it points to women's strengths rather than their weaknesses.

However, I have two strong misgivings about it. Firstly, my fear is that women's 'strengths' and biology have consistently been used against us: 'women are good at .. so therefore they should do that, and leave whatever to us men'. It's too close to the 'it's natural' which I feel I have been struggling against all my life. The 'natural', the biological and psychological are so easily commandeered by the right - it makes me very uneasy about it. Secondly, the difference argument focuses so intently on gender difference, it resembles the similarity approach in its assumption of a non problematic stance towards the category of women - apparently ignoring other inequalities - both formal and material - of for example, class, sexuality, age, disability and race.

On one hand, the difference argument could lead to less of the 'women must have access to that which men have' approach. But what would we have instead? Better training for traditional occupations? Again, other issues of difference need to be addressed. Which class, or race of women would be trained for which occupations or slots in the hierarchy?

On the other hand, the similarity argument produces, as shown through the study of European policy, a gender exclusive discourse of equal opportunities that influences training policy to such an effect that it maintains class and race power relations within the labour market. The exclusiveness of the similarity approach to gender equality leads to a lack of analysis of inequalities resulting from other power differentials. Inequalities in which some women will have some aspects of power over some women, some aspects of power over some men.

Conclusion.

The discourse and legislation of equality within the European Union, located within the theoretical framework of the Enlightenment and adapted to the late twentieth century economic needs, continues to reflect and address *relatively* unproblematic *formal* gender inequality. This is the epistemological environment in which Commission employed feminists work, and activists and academics lobby, mainly in and via DG V's Equal Opportunities Unit. This highly influential Equal Opportunities Unit is both legislatively restricted by, and continues to restrict itself by, its adherence to Article 119's early definition of equal opportunities meaning gender equality.

This gender exclusivity promotes only simplistic classifications, whereas what is needed are complex analyses along a matrix of gender, class, age, sexuality, race etc. Such analyses demand material equality and this, I believe, is not possible within European liberal democracy because European liberal democracy depends upon and constantly reconstructs the power differentials needed to maintain economic growth - power differentials not *only* of gender, but *also* of class, race, sexuality and physical or mental abilities and disabilities.

The issues raised by the similarity and difference debate are fundamental to the question of equality, but whether we say we are similar to men, or different from them, we are still considering ourselves in relation to men. The power relationships within and across gender, of the working class to the middle class, of the low educated to the higher

educated, of black to white, of homosexual to heterosexual, of able-bodied to disabled are ignored or considered as less important. The gender exclusivity of the European discourse of equal opportunities must be challenged if, for example, working class, low educated women are to have increased opportunities not only in relation to working class men, but to middle class women also.

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Paper presented to the FINAL CONFERENCE ON THE EUROPEAN 'NOW' INITIATIVE IN GERMANY, November 24/25 1994, NUREMBERG.

Equal opportunities and the European Social Fund.

In this paper I explore the linkage between the discourse of equal opportunities and the training policies of the European Social Fund, (ESF). Drawing on research findings, I focus on the ways in which the discourse of equal opportunities influences the ESF's Objective 3 vocational policies for unemployed women.

I argue that the discourse of equal opportunities focuses exclusively on gender. It is this gender-exclusivity which, combined with a lack of class or race analysis, leads to the ESF's persistent emphasis on training unemployed women in non-traditional manual skills - such as those required by the construction and building renovation industry: plumbing, carpentry and bricklaying. I believe that this has implications for those involved in ESF funded training. Those working in the field of women's vocational training often experience feelings of unease and self-doubt concerning the number of training-related jobs which the trainees get. The argument I present is that the reason for this lie not with the workers, nor the trainees, but in the discourse of equal opportunities itself.

The paper is structured around my consideration of the role played by the discourse of equal opportunities in ESF policy. Interwoven into this is my consideration of what this actually means for the vocational training of unemployed women and their subsequent chances of employment.

Firstly, a brief background to the linkage between equal opportunities and ESF policy. The legislative base of European equal opportunities policy, like that of the ESF, is located in the Treaty of Rome. It is not suprizing

therefore that the construction of the discourse of equal opportunities reflects the economic concerns and the egalitarian democratic aspirations of western liberal democracy. It is this, the discourse rather than the legislation of equal opportunities, which I focus on in this paper. By 'discourse' I mean the language and text used to represent a particular idea. This includes the policies and institutional structures of equal opportunities *and also* the numerous texts and understandings that all other players bring to it. It refers as much to the 'readers' and their interpretations of equal opportunities policies and legislation, as to any individuals or groups who actually 'write' these texts. Relevant to this paper is one particular group of text writers: the 'writers' of the European Action Programmes for the Equal Opportunities of Women. These Programmes are a filter through which all other policies relating to the equality of women are interpreted.

Turning to the discourse of equal opportunities itself, I identify three processes by which the discourse of equal opportunities operates. The first is the *belief* in the *possibilities* of equal opportunities. This belief is firmly grounded in the underlying liberal-democratic concept of 'equality' itself. The second is that seen as the basis of *women's* inequality - *gender*. And the third is the *visibility* of equal opportunities in action.

The first process within the discourse is the *belief* in the possibilities of equal opportunities. The economically determined equality legislation of the European Union found, from the mid 1970s, a sustaining culture in the post-war movements for social justice. However the union of the two is not that straightforward. For example the Women's Liberation Movement was never, even within one Member State let alone across Europe as a whole, *one* unified and easily identifiable movement. The equality legislation spoke most easily to those feminists best defined as liberal or egalitarian. Yet, for those who saw themselves as socialist, Marxist, revolutionary or radical, the same legislation was seen largely as a means to a more materially equitable ends. This is a very important feature of the discourse: its appeal to the politically 'left', the 'liberal' and even some of the 'right'. In my research, the women 'workers' of an ESF funded training project referred to the way in which such projects provided them with a focus for

their own 'political' agenda. The point here is that ***belief*** in the possibilities of equal opportunities is crucial to its success.

The second process within the discourse is the identification of gender as being the basis of women's inequality. In considering women, the discourse sees *only* gender and any inequalities experienced by women are simply a result of a *gender* bias within provision. Legislation and positive action such as access to male skills, can correct this. The fundamental flaw within the discourse is that it *lacks* class, or race, analysis. Embedded as it is in liberal-democracy, the discourse of equal opportunities can *only* recognise gender because gender inequalities can be addressed within the confines of political equality through formal, legal, measures. In this way women are given the same 'rights' to 'access' and 'opportunity' as men. The recognition of additional class and race inequalities would demand the recognition of material inequality. To address these additional structural class and race inequalities would require action against the structures and processes of capitalism itself - and this is the very basis of the economic foundations of the European Union. Equal opportunities then, despite its statements to the contrary, is *not* class (or race) free. On the contrary, it is actually ridden with class and race assumptions and divisions.

What do I mean by 'class'? 'Class' is a difficult concept to define. For instance, there is, within Britain, an almost instinctive, but difficult to express, understanding of class divisions. I'm talking here of everyday understandings of class as well as the official a,b,c classification based on occupation. With the loss of much manual labour and an increased, all-class spread of unemployment, its become a fudged indicator and it has never related very well to women. Neither do the past simplistic 'economic' indicators work. Neither does a person's 'accent' - provided its not too broad. Certainly, a person's address can be an indicator. Some people use 'educational attainment'. Although this too can be problematic. Working-class women who gain access to higher education (especially as a mature student) are not the same as working-class women who do not. Yet to say they are then middle-class ignores the cultural, social and economic realities of their lives, setting them adrift from their past, and

assumes from them a knowledge and way of being in the world which does not come with education alone, but is more essentially materially/economically, and even culturally, based. Working-class women then are as disadvantaged in their class - educationally, environmentally and economically, as they are by their gender, and black working-class women, living in white dominated and fundamentally racist societies, by their race also.

The discourse's gender exclusivity, combined with its lack of class analysis results in the trainees being encouraged into skills which reflect simplistic assumptions regarding their class and race *male* counterparts. Within this discourse, training policy is interpreted to mean that women should have access to the class-equivalent *male* occupation. Within the UK, throughout the 80s and into the early 90s, there have been two main types of training provided under ESF Objective 3. The first has been training linked to the setting up of co-operatives. The second, training in the non-traditional manual trades of the construction industry.

The gender-exclusivity of the discourse translates into a training policy which is focused on occupations in which women are under-represented. This means that working-class women are encouraged into traditional working-class male jobs such as those of the construction industry, and middle-class women are encouraged into the traditional middle-class male domains of science, engineering, technology and management. Importantly, neither working-class nor middle-class women are likely to disrupt the existing occupational hierarchies or entrenched male power. When women enter traditional male occupations, certain areas of work become associated with them: those areas become 'feminised', leaving the remaining areas, and higher status, still in the hands of the men. This means that the hierarchy of male power within that occupation is untouched.

Linked to this exclusive focus on *occupational* under-representation is the corresponding neglect of any *hierarchical* under-representation of women: that is the under-representation of women in supervisory and managerial positions across all industries and sectors of employment. The influential

1977 ESF Reform gave occupational under-representation first Priority, and hierarchical under-representation second. Effectively this meant applications for training for hierarchical movement actually stood very little chance of success. Policy concern over hierarchical under-representation has subsequently sunk from view. The effect of this is that the occupational hierarchy of male power remains intact. I repeat, the fact that the discourse of equal opportunities leads to working-class women being trained in non-traditional manual skills is not *in itself* a point for concern: women *should* have the opportunities to train in such previously denied skill areas. The concern is that the discourse actually *restricts opportunities* and even prevents training in other, equally persistently denied, skill and occupational areas. Each year from 1990 the UK government in its ESF Guidelines for objective 3 stress that training for women **must**, (in bold and underlined), be in occupations of *traditional* under-representation. At the same time they make no mention whatsoever of new or information technology training.

The ESF targeted working-class unemployed women are *not being encouraged* into skills relevant to hierarchical movement; unemployed *working-class* women are not being trained for the higher-status, higher-paid jobs within traditional female industries or occupational areas. For example such jobs might include
becoming a pattern maker or cutter in the textile industry; becoming a cutter in the printing industry; or becoming a store manager instead of a shop assistant. In every industry in which women work, there are higher status, higher paid occupations which are dominated by men. What is required is a funding acceptance of the long-term nature of progression routes, for instance from factory floor to management - including all the gradations along the way.

This brings me to the third process within the discourse. This is that these suggestions for training in alternative areas of 'under-representation' are not *visible* and ***visibility*** is the third vital function of the equal opportunities discourse. In order for the discourse to have any effect whatsoever it must be *seen* to be in operation. The discourse's requirement that the *possibilities* of equal opportunities be made *visible* is linked to the actual

training which can be provided. It is the *most traditional* male occupations which make the *possibilities* of equal opportunities *most visible*. For this reason, the concept of 'traditional' is central to the discourse - it makes visible the *extent* of the possibilities. Within the discourse's gender-exclusivity 'traditional' translates to mean 'access to *men's traditional jobs*'. The lack of class analysis then refines 'access to men's traditional jobs' to mean 'access of working-class women to working-class *men's* traditional jobs' - for instance, the manual skills of the construction industry. The simplistic understanding of the class of these women is simply reflected in the most extreme of their male class counterparts.

Furthermore, the discourse's demand for 'visibility' is possibly connected with the ESF's change in priority towards new technology training for unemployed women. The prominent position given to new technology training throughout the 1980s has subsequently been dropped - by the EU as well as the UK. This process began with the Structural Funds Reform of 1988. In the Community Support Frameworks at this time, agreed to by all Member States, there is no mention of 'new technology'. Similarly, there is no mention whatsoever of new technology in the Third Action Programme for Women, not even in its sections on employment or the labour market. This Programme covers the period 1991-1996. Yet all the labour market trends indicate that new technology is the main growth area, and that its influence is felt across all other industries and in the most occupations.

I suggest that this neglect is connected with the filtering power of the discourse of equal opportunities. That is to say, 'end-user' training presents only a modern-day equivalent of keyboarding which, being visibly almost totally the same as women's traditional office employment, does not fulfil the visibility offered by *traditionally* denied skills such as bricklaying. This means that the discourse of equal opportunities not only restricts training towards women's hierarchical under-representation, but also towards the most important occupational opportunities, not simply of the future, but increasingly of the present also.

So, to conclude, the discourse of equal opportunities promises to widen access and promote opportunity. Restricted by its gender-exclusivity and

lack of class analysis, it has concerned itself almost exclusively with opening doors to *occupations of traditional under-representation*. Yet, this door, marked 'traditional under-representation', whilst allegedly being opened, obscures the existence of other doors. Behind one lie the stairs of hierarchical under-representation. The other door, the one to the future skills of new technology, if not exactly shut, is not clearly sign-posted either. Behind an equal opportunities facade of *traditional* under-representation the technological skills and knowledge of the future and the present are effectively being gendered into male hands.

Even within the gender-exclusivity of this discourse and its related focus on occupational under-representation, it would, by even a marginal recognition of class and race inequalities, nevertheless be possible to identify traditional male occupations within predominately female industries. Training towards *these* 'male' occupations would enable women to use the skills and knowledge of that industry which they might already have. This would provide opportunity to employment in traditional male occupations. Furthermore, because male occupations within an industry invariably carry more status and responsibility and are better paid, it would also provide women with training related to hierarchical under-representation.

Finally, I want to reinsert this critique of the discourse of equal opportunities into its broader historical context. Equal opportunities legislation has, throughout this century, across Europe, improved the legal position and rights of women. This process has addressed the historical legal oppression of women, as women, across all classes and races and within all Member States. Equal opportunities policies, positive actions, and women's belief in the possibilities of equal opportunities is, without doubt, a step in the right direction. But we must be wary of believing that this in itself is sufficient. That if we are provided with *equal* access and opportunity, if we are given 'access' to that which men have, then all will be well. For such an acceptance ignores the additional oppressions and privileges based on class and race; the material consequences which can not be addressed by legal access or rights. These divisions between

women add a far more complex matrix to the simplistic gender division given above, and as such they require rather more complex solutions.

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